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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE GREATER
VANCOUVER VICTIMIZATION
SURVEY (1979)

BY

STATISTICS DIVISION

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Ministry of the Solicitor General

John Evans
Alex Himelfarb
Gerry Léger

Statistics Canada

Gary Catlin
Susan Ingram

Simon-Fraser University

Raymond Corrado
William Glackman
Ronald Roesch

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SUMMARY: HIGHLIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Greater Vancouver Victimization Survey (GVVS) is an exploration of crime from the victims' perspective. Victimization surveys initially emerged out of the growing recognition that official crime statistics left hidden much crime that was never reported by victims or never recorded by the police. More important, these official data gave us no information on the victims of crime - who they are, how much they suffer, or how they view their experiences with crime and the criminal justice system. The Greater Vancouver Victimization Survey, then, addressed five major themes:

- a) the extent and distribution of certain crimes;
- b) the risk of criminal victimization;
- c) the impact of criminal victimization;
- d) public perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system;
- e) victims' perceptions and needs.

A large random sample of adult residents of Vancouver were asked whether they had been victims of personal crimes (assault, sexual assault, robbery, theft of personal property) or household crimes (breaking and entering, vandalism, motor vehicle theft, or theft of household property) during 1978.

Extent of Victimizations

Residents of Vancouver were more likely to be victimized by crimes against their property than against their person. Thirty-eight percent of Vancouver households had experienced at least one household crime. Theft of household property was by far the most common household victimization, with vandalism second. The rates of break and enter and motor vehicle theft were substantially lower.

By contrast, twelve percent of adult Vancouver residents had been victims of at least one personal crime; 7% had suffered at least one violent encounter. Almost all the violent victimizations involved assaults; 1% had been robbed and 0.3% sexually assaulted. Males were far more likely than females and young residents were far more likely than older residents to experience personal victimization.

Reporting

About two-thirds of all personal victimizations and over half of household victimizations were never reported to the police. While about three quarters of motor vehicle thefts and almost two-thirds of break and enters had been reported, only about one third of household thefts and incidents of vandalism and assault had been reported. Official statistics, then, represent only a fraction of break and enters, robberies and sexual assaults and an even smaller fraction of incidents of assault, vandalism and theft of personal and household property.

The most frequent reasons given in the GVVS for not reporting crimes were: the incident had been 'too minor'; 'the police could not do anything about it'; and reporting the crime to the police was 'too inconvenient'. It seems evident that while seriousness of the offence is an important factor in reporting decisions, victims also weigh the potential embarrassment and inconvenience of reporting against the possibility of the police being able to do something about the crime.

Risk of Personal Victimization

Victims of personal crimes do seem to have a distinctive set of demographic and social characteristics. Males, young residents, the unmarried, students and the unemployed were the

categories of people most likely to be the victims of personal crimes. One crucial factor in understanding variations in victimization rates has been termed the "lifestyle-exposure" factor. Simply, some categories of people, by virtue of their lifestyles, are more often in places and situations in which the risk of victimization is high. For example, a young, unmarried male is far more likely to seek out the nighttime recreational/entertainment facilities of the city core than is an older married male or female.

Elderly people are relatively rarely the victims of personal crimes, and those among them who are unmarried, living alone or retired are least likely to be victimized. It becomes apparent that as they become more and more "disengaged" from the normal round of activities of work and family, the elderly are less exposed to risk situations. However, as discussed in a later section, these same factors of social and physical isolations may serve to increase their fear of crime.

The importance of the "lifestyle-exposure" explanation is highlighted when we examine the temporal characteristics of victimization incidents. Nearly two-thirds of personal victimizations occurred in the summer or fall, and they were somewhat more likely to occur on weekends than on weekdays. Clearly interactions between persons in public places are likely to decline in the winter and increase during the summer, and to be at their highest on weekends.

Personal victimization was, not surprisingly, most likely in the evening or nighttime. However, this varied by type of offence: robberies and assaults were distinctly evening or nighttime occurrences; thefts of personal property were more likely to occur in the afternoon; and sexual assaults were fairly evenly distributed throughout the day. It is evident that the importance of public exposure (and type of public exposure) varies by type of crime. This becomes even more apparent when we examine the location of victimization.

Most personal victimizations occurred in public places - only rarely in or near the victim's residence. Robberies were quite literally street crimes - most likely to occur on streets outside the immediate vicinity of the victim's neighbourhood or work place. Assaults happened just about anywhere - this offence is more likely to be spontaneous and offenders are probably less concerned about 'escape routes' - but were most likely away from the victim's neighbourhood, often on the street or in a bar. Sexual assaults were more likely than either robbery or assault to occur in and around the victims' residence. Nevertheless, overall violent victimizations were most likely to occur at night, away from home and neighbourhood. Personal theft, on the other hand, was more likely during the day, around home, school, work or commercial establishments such as stores or shopping centres - where, of course, opportunity for theft without confrontation is great.

It is evident that certain lifestyles increase the risks of certain types of victimization. As we would expect, those who frequently went out in the evenings were substantially more likely to be victims of violent offences than those who more often stayed at home. That elderly people went out at night far less often than other age groups helps account for their low victimization rates.

Risk of Household Victimization

Unlike the findings of victimization surveys in the United States, we find that Vancouver residents living in multi-unit structures were less likely to suffer from a breaking and entering than those in single or attached houses. Perhaps the greater likelihood in multi-unit structures of direct confrontation inhibits Vancouver burglars. Break and enter most often occurred in the summer months when access is easier, school is out and residents are more likely to be away from their homes for extended periods. Similarly, break and enter rarely occurred in the morning when homes are most likely occupied, but otherwise was fairly evenly distributed throughout the rest of the day.

The majority of burglaries involved some form of forced entry but rarely any personal threat or violence. Almost all residents reported that they consistently locked their doors, though very few had burglar alarms. In any case, neither door-locking nor alarms seemed to be significantly related to risk. Of all the household characteristics surveyed, the amount of time dwellings were left unoccupied seems to be the single most important risk factor.

Motor vehicle thefts were overwhelmingly nighttime incidents and were most likely to occur near the victims' homes. Perhaps many relax their security precautions once they have parked in their own neighbourhoods. In general, the characteristics of break and enter and motor vehicle thefts seem to reveal the importance of opportunity factors - unoccupied homes, unobserved cars - in risk of household victimization.

Personal Injury

Fewer than one in three violent crimes involved the use of weapons. When weapons were involved, victims were most often attacked by offenders using blunt instruments or pieces of wood, sticks, rocks and the like. Firearms were by far the least prevalent weapon, even in cases of armed robbery. In this respect, the Vancouver data differ significantly from American findings.

That weapons, and particularly firearms, played so small a role in criminal victimizations in Vancouver helps account for the great frequency with which victims took some self-protective action - most often, hitting, kicking or otherwise fighting the assailant. Nearly all of the sexual assault victims used self-protective measures.

Of the 72,790 personal victimizations where the potential for physical injury existed, slightly more than half involved an

actual physical attack: of those who were attacked, just over half sustained injuries, about one-third of which were serious enough to require medical attention. The greatest likelihood of injury - and of serious injury - occurred in sexual assaults. Victims who tried to fight off the assailant were more likely to be injured than those who took less drastic measures or no action at all. Victims were more likely to be injured when the offenders were well known to them than when they were strangers. While incidents involving firearms held the greatest potential for serious injury, victims were, in fact, injured less frequently.

Financial Loss

Slightly over 10 million dollars in total losses were incurred by victims of personal crimes - largely through property loss, but also through personal injury and lost work time.

All household victimizations in Greater Vancouver for the year resulted in total or gross losses from theft of almost 30 million dollars. Net losses (subtracting the total recovered) for all household victimizations amounted to about 10.6 million dollars. While motor vehicle thefts produced the largest gross losses, break and enter and theft of household property incidents produced the largest net losses. Cash and jewellery were the most popular items for burglars. Damage from vandalism produced total losses of over 3.7 million dollars, most of this in damage to automobiles. In fact, almost half of all household victimizations involved motor vehicles in some way.

Clearly, losses through criminal victimization are significant. However, the average gross loss per incident was \$595 for break and enter and \$163 for theft of household property. No doubt such losses are likely to hit hardest those groups on marginal incomes - the elderly for example. As well, it is evident that the commonsense view that most crime involves violence and

serious injury is unwarranted. Injury and especially serious injury is rare as is the use of firearms by criminals. On the other hand, women's fear of crime may well reflect their accurate perceptions that if they are victimized the costs of that victimization - in physical injury and in other more profound ways - are likely to be greater for them.

Fear of Crime

Canadians are often characterized as living in perpetual fear of crime. The Vancouver data suggest that this characterization exaggerates the extent to which most people, in Vancouver at least, view crime as a very serious social or personal problem. The majority of residents did perceive a crime problem in the larger metropolitan region, where, they believed, the crime rate was high and rising. On the other hand, residents typically perceived crime rates in their own neighbourhood as relatively low and stable. Most appear to think some sort of buffer protected their neighbourhoods from crime. However, within this general trend, those who had been victimized, those who lived in areas where victimization rates were high, and those who had little education and low income were more likely to see crime as a problem in their own neighbourhood.

Similarly, very few of the residents expressed any fear of daytime crime and only about one-third expressed fear of nighttime crime. Ironically, those least likely to be victimized were most likely to express fear of crime. Fear was concentrated among the most socially and especially physically vulnerable as evident in the responses of females and elderly people. Females and elderly people were also most likely to curtail their activities to minimize exposure to the risk of victimization. However, beyond locking doors, the 'fearful' were no more likely to participate in crime prevention programmes, nor to take any other precautionary measures - beyond risk avoidance. It may be significant that the

most fearful were also the least likely to be aware of the existence of crime prevention and victim compensation programmes. For some reason, these programmes tend not to reach those who might benefit most.

Perceptions of the Police

The various municipal police forces of Greater Vancouver were generally assessed positively. The police were usually viewed as approachable and successful in enforcing laws. However, members of the public made fewer positive comments about the ability of the police to respond promptly to calls or to provide crime prevention information.

Peoples' evaluations of police performance were influenced by their previous contacts with the police. Those whose last contact was for a traffic violation, for example, were the least supportive, while participants in crime prevention programmes were the most supportive.

The age of a respondent was extremely important in terms of assessments of police performance. Those under thirty were far less likely to assess the police positively. Since it is young persons who are most frequently involved in violent crimes - both as victims and as offenders - the police confront the problem of exerting authority towards or offering assistance to those least receptive to either. On the other hand, the very high regard with which elderly people (even elderly victims) view the police suggests that the police can play a central role in allaying their fears of crime and referring them to other social and criminal justice agencies.

Victims in most of the municipalities were less likely than non-victims to view the police positively and positive assessments declined as the number and seriousness of victimizations increased. Very few victims who had reported incidents to the police were aware of the progress or outcome of the cases, and when victims assessed police performance in handling their case they were least satisfied with the job police had done in keeping them informed. In general, whether victims or non-victims, the public seems least satisfied with the information services provided by the police.

Policy Implications

Victimization surveys are intended to serve a variety of audiences and to contribute to criminal justice policy in a variety of areas - containment of crime, prevention of crime, containment and prevention of fear of crime, and victim assistance. It seems evident, for example, that the information on the temporal and physical characteristics of personal and household crimes can usefully inform the development of individual, community and police strategies for crime prevention. To take one simple example, these data should reinforce the importance for householders of informing neighbours and police when they plan to leave their homes unoccupied for an extended period and ensuring that the house appears occupied.

Similarly, information about public perceptions of the police can be valuable in devising policing policies. The data suggest, for example, that the police might benefit from school liaison programmes directed at influencing youth perceptions of the police, that a policy of keeping victims informed, and of better communications generally, will enhance perceptions of the police, and that the police can play a central role in helping elderly people cope with crime and their fear of crime.

Indeed elderly people provide a useful illustration of the kinds of policy implications such data provide. One implication would seem to be that crime prevention programmes and campaigns should not play upon elderly people's fear of crime. This will likely reinforce their sense of helplessness and, therefore, their fear and such fear does not seem to lead to active participation in crime prevention activities. Rather, crime prevention programmes for elderly people must seek to promote activities which will give them a greater sense of personal control. Such programmes must also recognize their special needs. Special 'outreach' efforts may be necessary to ensure that they are aware of services offered, have access to these services and are mobilized to participate in prevention programmes.

An extensive and systematic discussion of policy implications must await the larger data base of the forthcoming Canadian Urban Victimization Survey.